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How Nebraska volleyball plans to pack Memorial Stadium

By Elizabeth Merrill

WHEN THEY SCORED tickets last spring to Volleyball Day in Nebraska, Jan Merrill and her daughter planned out a road trip. They would drive 2½ hours from Elgin, Nebraska, on winding roads through tiny towns to reach Lincoln, where they'd splurge on crab legs at a local restaurant, watch the volleyball match and stay overnight in a hotel. Maybe they'd get a pedicure the next day.

Merrill and her daughter, Melissa Borer, have attended Nebraska volleyball games since 1995, when Melissa was 11. The trip from Elgin would always be worth it when Merrill (no relation to the writer) and Melissa got to the game and crammed into a packed arena to watch their favorite team. So Borer knew the Aug. 30 event would be unlike anything they'd ever witnessed -- the Huskers' volleyball team playing outdoors at night under the lights at a packed Memorial Stadium in front of more than 90,000 fans more accustomed to traveling there to watch football games.

Their seats for Wednesday night's match are in Section 28, alongside eight family members, including Borer's 91-year-old grandmother. But Merrill won't be there. Lung cancer has spread to her brain, clavicle and kidney, and she's at home in hospice care, navigating back and forth to her bed with a walker. To the outside world, it might seem outlandish that a volleyball match could provide any sort of respite for a family in the grips of sickness and sadness, but for Borer, it temporarily will. And it's cliché to say that the wildly successful Nebraska volleyball team has been the North Star in a state craving any kind of sports identity in the past decade.

But it has been.

When Borer visits her mom, she sits next to her, pulls up old Nebraska matches on YouTube and holds her hand. Sometimes, Merrill wakes up and glances at the television.

"Good work, girls," she'll say.

FOR GENERATIONS, NEBRASKANS have boasted that on football Saturdays, Memorial Stadium becomes the third-largest city in the state. On Wednesday, the place will become volleyball city. More than 91,000 people are expected to fill the stadium to watch two matches, potentially setting a record for the most-attended women's sporting event in the world. The record, 91,648, was set in March 2022 at a UEFA Women's Champions League match in Barcelona.

The event is so momentous that Nebraska's chancellor canceled school for the day and the board of regents gave the OK to sell beer. (Alcoholic beverages are not allowed at football games.)

"I don't know how to properly define just how big this is," Nebraska athletic director Trev Alberts said last week. "Unless [the football team is] undefeated when we play Michigan in Week 5, I don't know of anything that's going to be bigger."

Seven months of planning, every day, has gone into this, with staging meetings from police, fire, rescue and traffic to concessions, the band and marketing. Lindsay Peterson, the director of volleyball operations at Nebraska, said weather monitoring started about 10 days out because it's too unpredictable in the Midwest -- especially with the heat index, which topped 115 degrees in Lincoln most of last week. Nobody wants to even

talk about what could happen if light rain hits the Taraflex court built on a stage near the north end zone. The most recent forecast calls for sunny skies, a high of 82 and winds of 10 mph.

The impetus for this whole production? A rivalry, of course. Last September,

nearly 500 miles away in Madison, Wisconsin, the Badgers -- Nebraska's biggest nemesis and the team that beat it in the 2021 national championship -- moved a match to the Kohl Center and drew a crowd of 16,833, breaking Nebraska's attendance record for a regular-season match.



With a long history of sellouts, Nebraska volleyball is moving into football's Memorial Stadium on Wednesday and could set an attendance record for women's sports.

Of all the things that captivate Nebraska sports fans, it's their attendance records. A few years ago, when the football team's six-decades-long sellout streak was in jeopardy, boosters and corporate sponsors [bought unsold tickets](#) to keep the record going. Nebraska volleyball hasn't had to worry about that; eight of the top nine crowds in NCAA volleyball history are matches that have involved the Huskers.

But the Badgers' one-upping the record nagged at Nebraska fans, who sent a flurry of emails to coach John Cook urging him to take his team somewhere to reclaim their record. After the season, he plotted. He initially pondered Pinnacle Bank Arena, Nebraska's basketball venue. It wasn't big enough.

After a couple of conversations, Alberts told Cook there was one place they could go: Memorial Stadium.

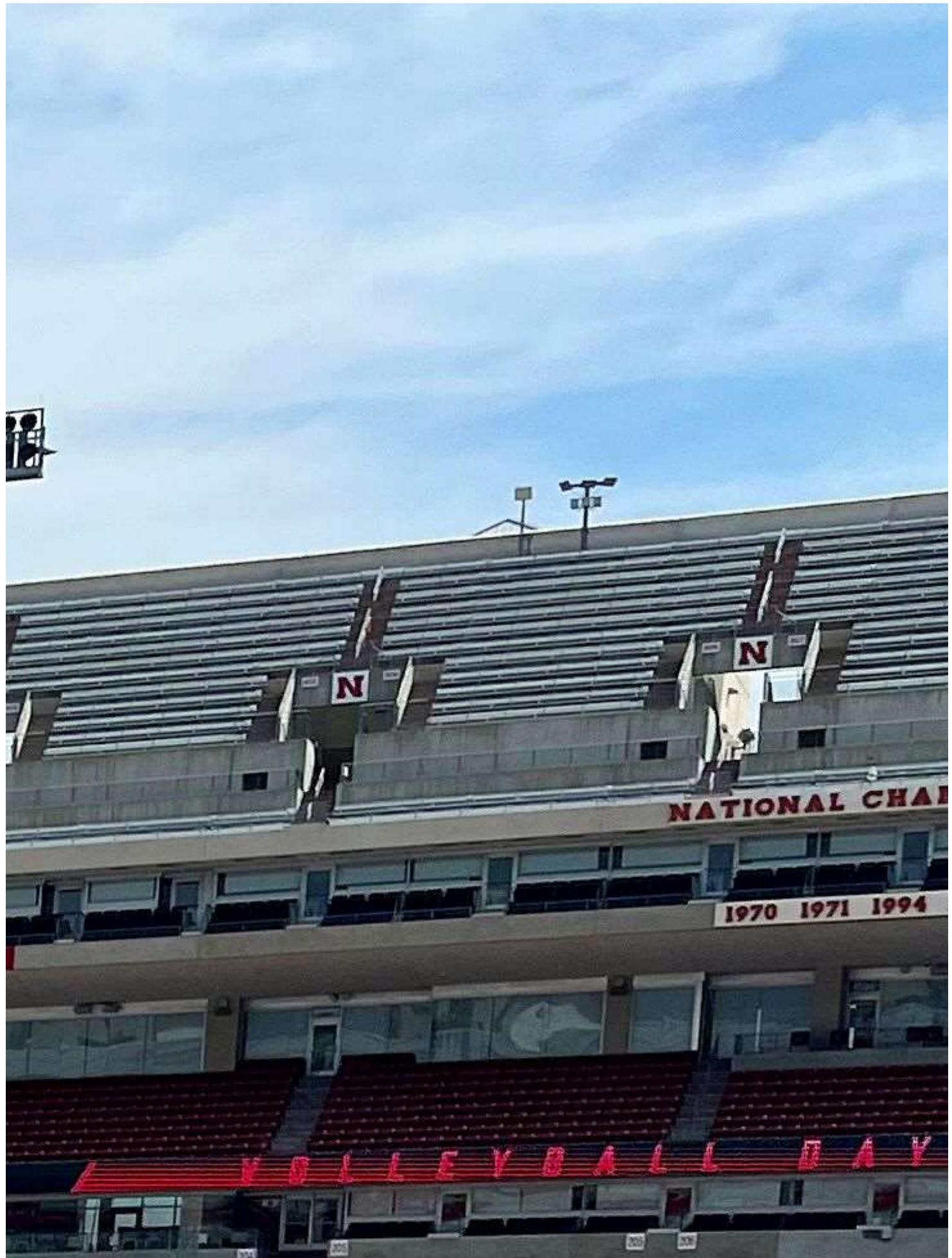
Cook was apprehensive. What if they sold *only* 10,000 tickets? He eventually agreed with one condition: That they bring in a musical act to perform after the match to help draw a bigger crowd. Tickets went on sale in late April -- \$25 for adults, \$5 for children. More than 82,000 seats sold within three days. No musical act had been announced yet.

The night will feature four in-state teams in a celebration of the state's affinity for volleyball. The Huskers play Omaha at 7 p.m. CT on Wednesday on the Big Ten Network, and Nebraska-Kearney will face Wayne State at 4:30 p.m. in an exhibition. Country singer Scotty McCreery will perform afterward. The in-state teams, which operate under substantially lower profiles and budgets, will receive \$50,000 to travel to Lincoln.

Wisconsin coach Kelly Sheffield told reporters last month that he was excited not just for Nebraska, but "everybody in that stadium," and their sport.

Alberts said the overall presentation will exceed anything they do for home football games.

"We believe we have one opportunity to tell the story of volleyball in the state of Nebraska, and it's not just the Huskers," he said.



The idea of Wednesday's event might have taken shape because of a volleyball rivalry, but the origin story of Volleyball Day in Nebraska started a long time ago and doesn't happen without a beloved football program that built a tradition of winning and conditioned its fan base to expect success. It also doesn't happen without a couple of eccentric, driven coaches who seized upon that culture to build a volleyball program that has produced a legion of All-Americans, eight Olympians and a tradition of its own dating back to the 1970s. Combine that with a fan base craving a reason to cheer while football and men's basketball fell on hard times, and you have a program that has become the envy of women's sports across the country.

"I'd been told [about Nebraska's volleyball], but seeing it yourself is completely different," said Andy Cook, 51, from Raleigh, North Carolina. "You feel the support there every single time you step outside."

IN THE EARLY 2000s, after covering Nebraska volleyball for a couple of years at the Omaha World-Herald, I told Cook that I was moving to the Cornhusker football beat full time and wouldn't be writing about his team anymore.

Cook stared blankly.

"Is that a demotion?" he asked.

Cook would never knock football. He says one of the greatest days in his 2½ decades at Nebraska was Dec. 8, 2001, the Saturday night when the volleyball team escaped with a dramatic five-set win against Florida to advance to the national semifinals and Nebraska quarterback Eric Crouch became the third Husker to win the Heisman Trophy.

Cook loves football, and occasionally attends football practices. He just never acquiesced to the notion that his team was beholden to anyone, or that it should take a back seat.

His first year as head coach at Nebraska in 2000, he spoke to the Beef Club, a group of Cornhusker football boosters, and mentioned an upcoming trip to China when someone in the crowd asked him how they'd pay for it. "Well, you know it's coming from the Beef Club," Cook recalled the man saying. "We're the ones paying for your trip, just so you know that."

Cook bit his lip and told himself that someday his team was going to make that guy eat his words and become a program that pays for itself. Last year, according to Nebraska's financial report to the NCAA, the volleyball program had a net revenue of \$233,454. Cook told ESPN that volleyball actually netted \$1 million, a number, according to the university, that includes seat premiums and donations specific to volleyball.

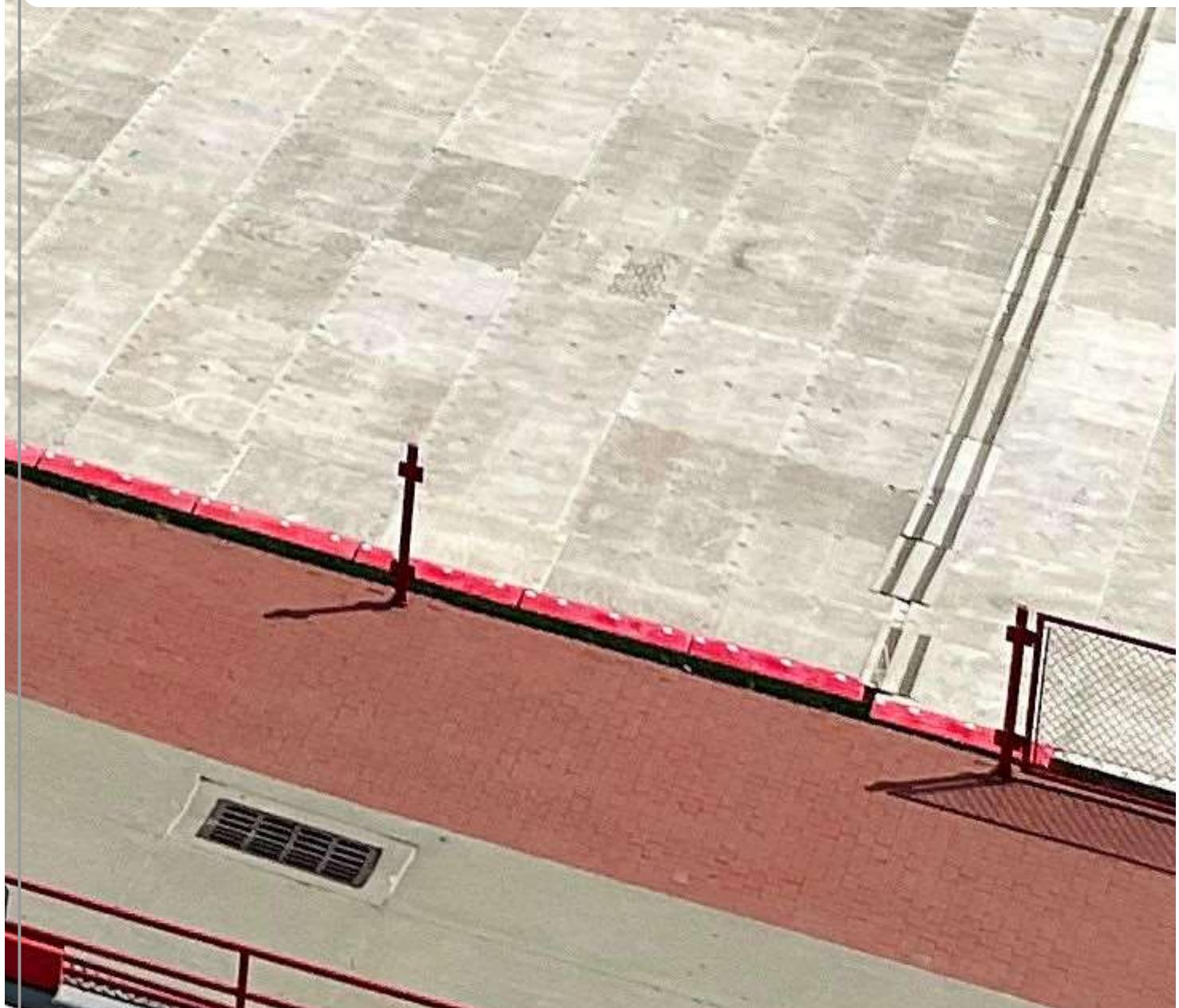
They also made more money in ticket sales than any other women's team -- or any sport -- in the Power 5 from 2021 to '22, according to data on public schools from the [Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics](#) at Syracuse University. It was a large margin: \$2.1 million, followed by Louisville women's basketball at \$1.2 million. (UConn women's basketball, which competes in a non-Power 5 conference, sold \$2.4 million in tickets, but UConn's expenses, including travel and coaching, created a net revenue of minus \$5.4 million, according to the school's financial disclosure records to the NCAA.)

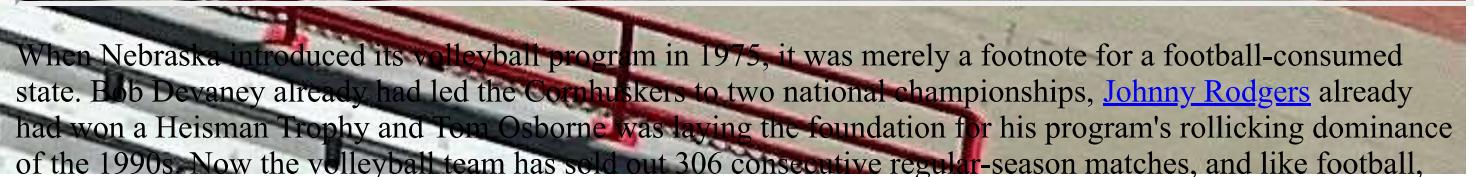


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When Nebraska introduced its volleyball program in 1975, it was merely a footnote for a football-consumed state. Bob Devaney already had led the Cornhuskers to two national championships, [Johnny Rodgers](#) already had won a Heisman Trophy and Tom Osborne was laying the foundation for his program's rollicking dominance of the 1990s. Now the volleyball team has sold out 306 consecutive regular-season matches, and like football,

holds five national championships.

But Cook and former coach Terry Pettit know that volleyball didn't get there on its own.

"Nebraska does not become a major player without a successful football program," said Pettit, who came to Nebraska in 1977. "Because you had to have the resources. Ultimately, then, you had to be in the right conferences."

The evolution of Nebraska volleyball began with Pettit scheduling matches on the same day as football games, urging those leaving the stadium to come watch his team. He even hung volleyball signs in the bathrooms to promote matches.

And while Osborne and Devaney are credited with inspiring little boys to dream of playing football for Nebraska, Pettit is the man who made Nebraska girls want to play volleyball. Pettit grew up in Indiana shooting basketballs in haylofts and barns. He knew how a successful college program could change the culture of a state, and what young people wanted to be.

Some athletes were better in other sports, but they came to Nebraska to play volleyball because they couldn't resist the opportunity to be in that environment. That's culture, he said.

Pettit laid the groundwork by being accessible to every high school coach, whether they were from Omaha or the tiniest town in the panhandle. He'd hold clinics in places like rural Dunning, in the Nebraska sandhills, where three girls would show up.

"You do it to develop relationships," Pettit said. "Maybe Hooper, Nebraska, goes through 25 years and doesn't have a player that can play on the university team, but then along comes Jordan Larson."

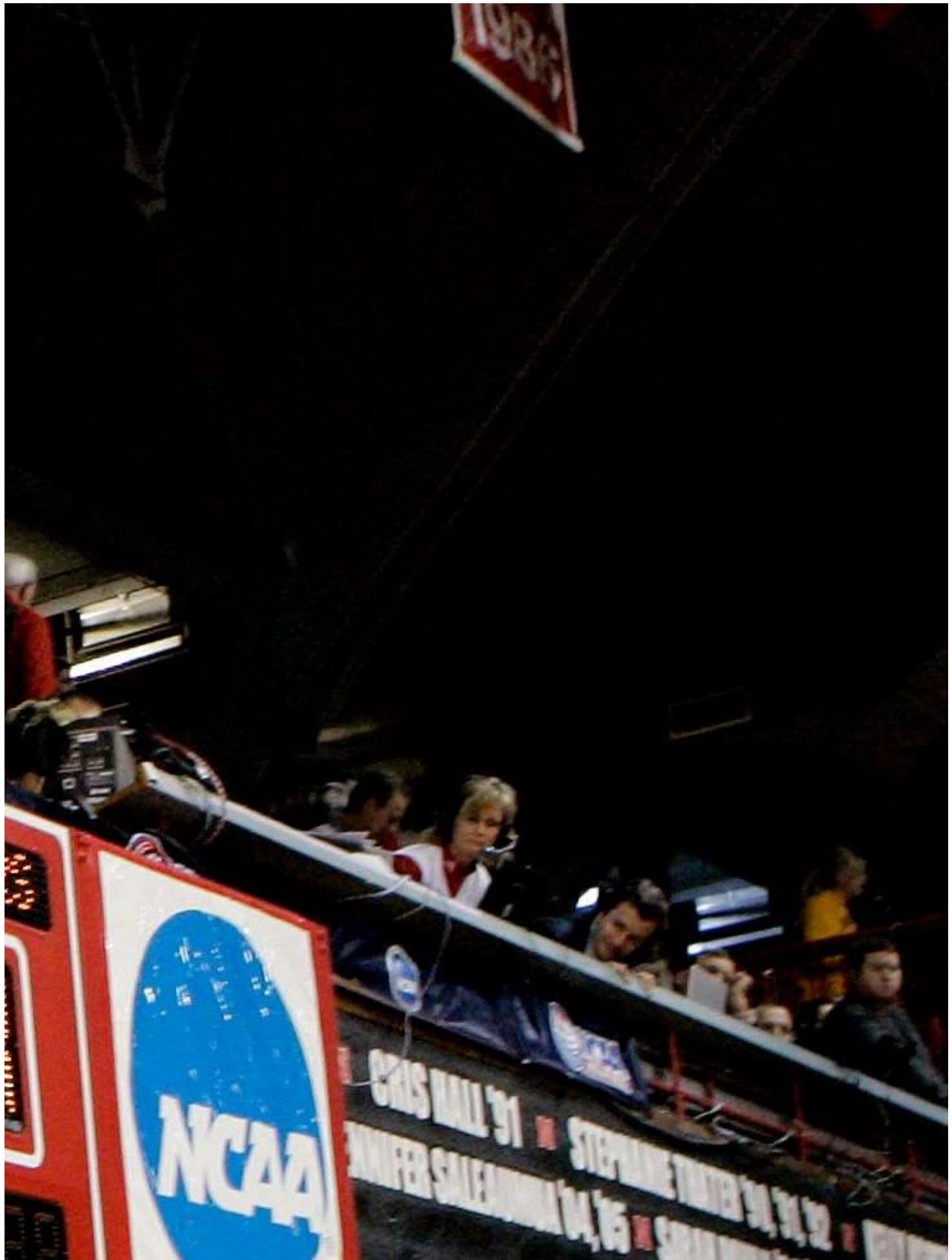
Larson, who hails from a town of 830, led Nebraska to the 2006 national championship and was MVP on the United States volleyball team that won its first gold medal in the Tokyo Olympics. Larson will join Cook's coaching staff as an assistant this fall.

Pettit says the unique thing about volleyball in Nebraska is the success at all levels of the state, high school, junior college, small college, Division I, and how they're complementary to each other. "It's an organism, where all the parts to this point have recognized it's a tremendous advantage for the other parts of the organism to have success," he says.

By the mid-1990s, Nebraska volleyball was a hot ticket. Merrill and her daughter made their first trip to Lincoln for a volleyball game in 1995, the year the Cornhuskers won their first national championship. Merrill and Borer drove all the way from Elgin, Nebraska, walked up to the ticket office and were told the match was sold out.

"My mom was asking, 'Is there anything we can do?'" Borer said, "and this gentleman overheard it and said, 'We have some extra tickets. Here's two tickets.' Then after that ... we started acquiring ways to get tickets, networking or getting them off the street."

Pettit -- who would leave with one national championship, 21 conference championships, six trips to the final four and 649 wins in 23 seasons -- had built such a powerhouse program that when he made the decision to retire, he was able to convince a successful Division I coach at another university to come to Lincoln as an associate head coach and eventually be his hand-picked successor.



In 1988, Nebraska played Wisconsin for a trip to the national semifinals. Cook, a former NU assistant, lifted the Badgers from a team that conducted pre-season tryouts to an up-and-coming powerhouse.

Nebraska won that night, and Pettit and his wife, Diane, were in the stands as a VIPs. Diane, a designer with J.C. Penney, proposed the idea of Cook leaving the Badgers to become the Huskers' coach. Cook accepted, just as he had done with expectations, and the rest is history.

Cook:

"I thought, 'Well, I can't do the best job I can do here. I'm going to go to another place.'"

COOK WANTED TO be a football coach. Just out of college, he landed a job at Francis Parker High, a private school in his hometown of San Diego. It came with a stipulation under one condition that he coach girls' basketball, softball and volleyball.

He knew little about volleyball, and had to read books to get a grasp on the basics. In his six years coaching Francis Parker volleyball, he went 162-18, won three state championships and had a 90-match winning streak.

After a three-year stint at Nebraska, he took an assistant coaching job with the U.S. men's team in 1992, helping lead it to a bronze medal in the Barcelona Olympics.

His bio at Nebraska says that his philosophy can be summed up in two words: Dream big. When he became the Cornhuskers' head coach, one of his goals was to sell out the NU Coliseum. Cook's first team went undefeated in 2000 and won a national championship over ... Wisconsin.

The following season, the sellout streak began. It should be noted that this was also around the time that the football team began its downslide. Longtime records fell during this unbroken and two-decade period that included six coaching changes and nine losing seasons.

Volleyball, meanwhile, had to come to terms with the fact that its product had grown so much that it was not accessible to most people.

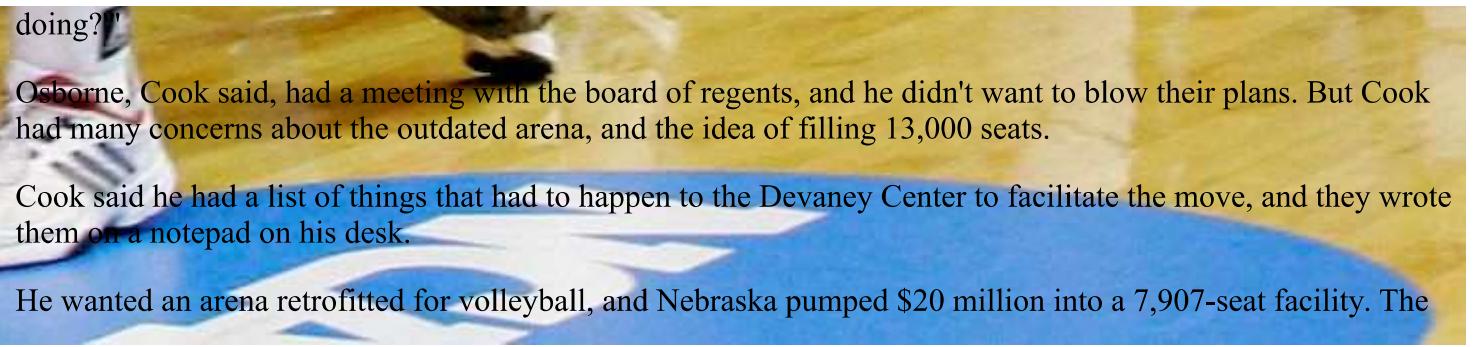
The NU Coliseum was built specifically for volleyball, in an intimate venue. It seated 4,030 people, and when the crowd was loud -- it was almost always loud -- opponents said it felt as if the crowd was on top of them.

Maisie Osborne, a sophomore libero from Firth, Nebraska, remembers her dad taking her to her first volleyball match at the Coliseum when she was a little girl. She was 4 or 5. Nebraska had just scored a point when they started to walk up the steps, and she heard a giant roar. "It was the loudest cheering I'd ever heard," she said. "Once we got to the top," she said, "I was like, 'Dad, what's this? Why does everyone want to play here?' I was just in shock. I could not believe how awesome the crowd was, the energy. And I remember him telling me, 'You have to be really, really good.'"

From 2000 to 2013, Nebraska went 511-36 at the Coliseum. It was sold out every night in 2011, when Nebraska announced that its basketball games were moving to the Bob Devaney Sports Center, which is now Pinnacle Bank Arena. One day, Nebraska's athletic director at the time suggested volleyball to make Devaney their home. A reporter called Cook and asked what he thought of the idea. Cook said that if the basketball was good enough for basketball, why is it good enough for volleyball?

The story goes, and the phone rang in the volleyball office. It was Osborne, and he wanted to see Cook right away. Cook was Osborne's mentor, and said he loved working with him because he "knows how coaches feel." But on that particular day, Osborne was not calling to exchange pleasantries.

"I walk over to his office," Cook said. "His secretary, she goes, 'I've never seen him so mad ... He's so mad his veins are popping out of his neck.' I walk in there, and he's like, I think he said, 'Judas Priest, John. What are you

 doing?"

Osborne, Cook said, had a meeting with the board of regents, and he didn't want to blow their plans. But Cook had many concerns about the outdated arena, and the idea of filling 13,000 seats.

Cook said he had a list of things that had to happen to the Devaney Center to facilitate the move, and they wrote them on a notepad on his desk.

He wanted an arena retrofitted for volleyball, and Nebraska pumped \$20 million into a 7,907-seat facility. The

school also added five skyboxes that cost \$40,000 apiece annually, and filled those. This past summer, Nebraska put 402 more seats in the arena, and it is still the toughest ticket in the state.

"We probably underbuilt," Cook said. "Looking at things now, we probably didn't dream big enough."

PERHAPS THE BEST person to explain the hold that volleyball has on the state of Nebraska, especially in rural areas, is Dani Busboom Kelly. She's the head coach of Louisville now and has taken the Cardinals to two national semifinals the past two seasons. They fell to Texas in last year's national championship game.

She met Cook more than two decades ago, at a camp when she was 14. Busboom was a multisport athlete from Cortland, Nebraska, who'd go on to win four state titles in three different sports. But she was not one of the blue-chippers at that camp. So you can imagine her surprise when Cook approached her.

"He asked to see my hands," she said, "which I thought was so weird."

She was too young to comprehend the gears turning in Cook's head, the plans of her becoming a setter. Busboom was supposed to leave for a softball tournament in Colorado that day, but Cook asked her parents if she could stay until the end of camp.

She received an award, and her family drove through the night to get her to the tournament. But her trajectory was already set. She was a volleyball player. She joined a better club team and started competing at a higher level. She knew that if a Nebraska scholarship never came, she'd still have a chance to play Division I volleyball.

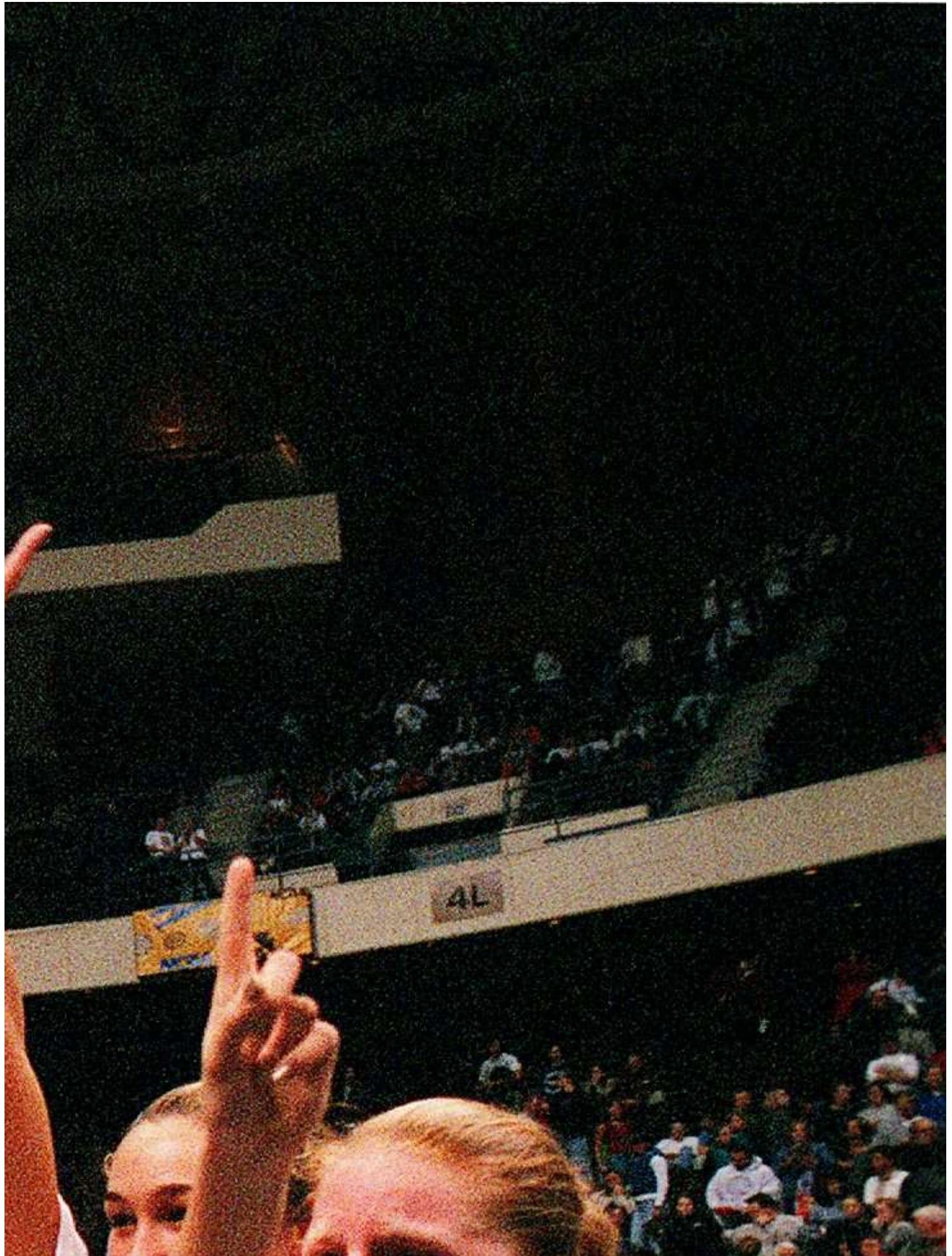
So back in Cortland, Busboom trained and trained to become the best setter she could be. She was offered a scholarship to Nebraska, and of course accepted. She played in every match as a freshman and spent three seasons at setter.

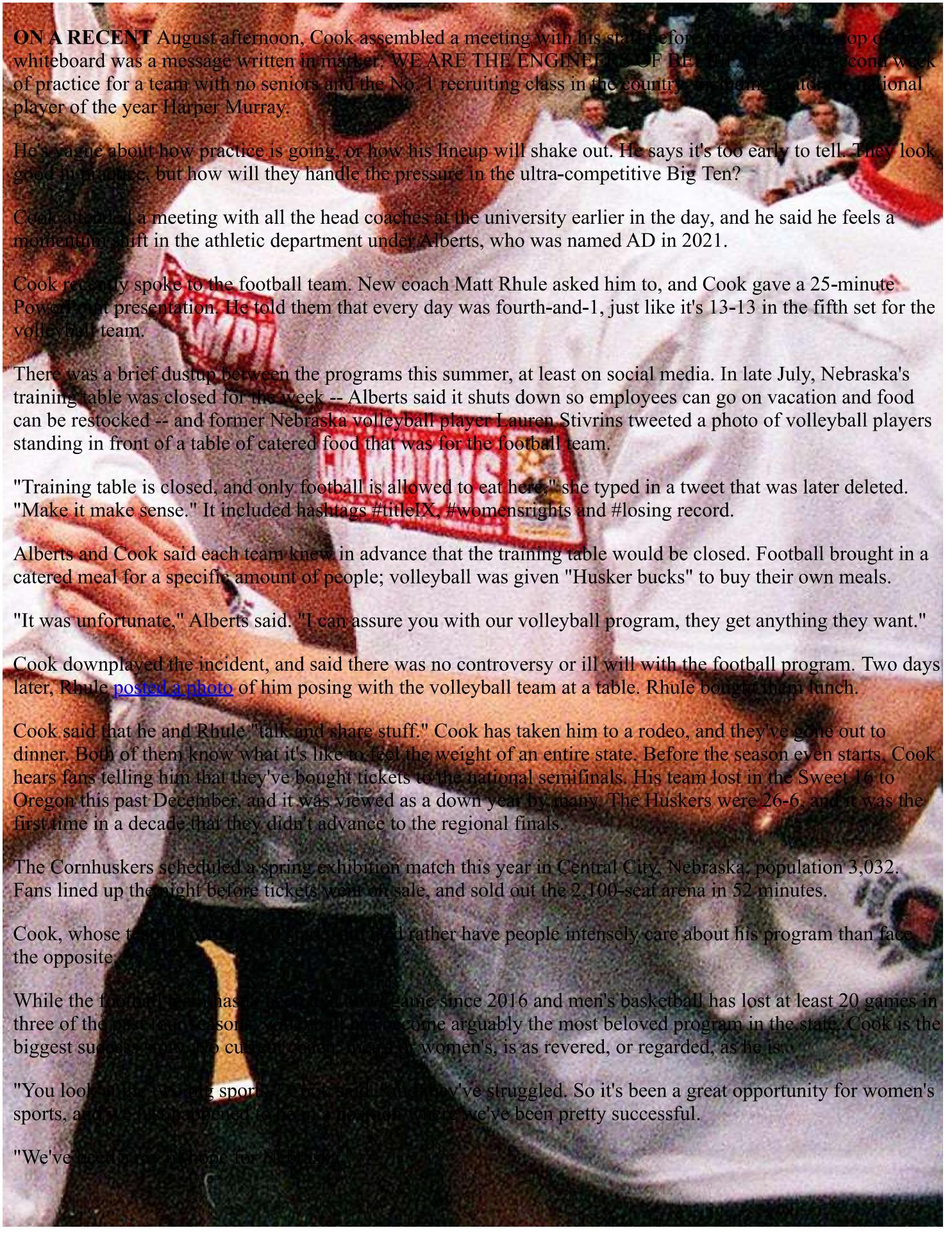
After leading Nebraska to the national championship game as a junior -- the Huskers lost to Washington -- Cook asked her to switch to libero, which specializes in defense. She accepted the job, and Nebraska won its second national championship.

Her parents still have Huskers volleyball season tickets. Busboom Kelly said volleyball is a "way of life" in the fall in Nebraska. Her program at Louisville now has a season-ticket waiting list, and she said she'd also like to venture out of the confines of her team's venue, possibly playing a match at the KFC Yum! Center, which seats about 22,000.

"You do get away [from Nebraska] and you think, 'This place is special,' and this is special," she said. "But it's moments like the game at Memorial Stadium that you realize that we still have room to grow and there's still one program leading the pack."

Volleyball Day in Nebraska has piqued the curiosity of coaches in other sports, too. Patty Gasso, who has led Oklahoma to three straight NCAA softball championships, has said she would like to follow Nebraska volleyball's lead and play a game at OU's football stadium. An Oklahoma spokesperson told ESPN there haven't been any recent updates on that possibility.





ON A RECENT August afternoon, Cook assembled a meeting with his staff before practice. On the top of the whiteboard was a message written in marker: WE ARE THE ENGINEERS OF BELIEF. It was the second week of practice for a team with no seniors and the No. 1 recruiting class in the country, including three national player of the year Harper Murray.

He's vague about how practice is going, or how his lineup will shake out. He says it's too early to tell. They look good in practice, but how will they handle the pressure in the ultra-competitive Big Ten?

Cook attended a meeting with all the head coaches at the university earlier in the day, and he said he feels a momentum shift in the athletic department under Alberts, who was named AD in 2021.

Cook recently spoke to the football team. New coach Matt Rhule asked him to, and Cook gave a 25-minute PowerPoint presentation. He told them that every day was fourth-and-1, just like it's 13-13 in the fifth set for the volleyball team.

There was a brief dustup between the programs this summer, at least on social media. In late July, Nebraska's training table was closed for the week -- Alberts said it shuts down so employees can go on vacation and food can be restocked -- and former Nebraska volleyball player Lauren Stivrins tweeted a photo of volleyball players standing in front of a table of catered food that was for the football team.

"Training table is closed, and only football is allowed to eat here," she typed in a tweet that was later deleted. "Make it make sense." It included hashtags #titleIX, #womensrights and #losing record.

Alberts and Cook said each team knew in advance that the training table would be closed. Football brought in a catered meal for a specific amount of people; volleyball was given "Husker bucks" to buy their own meals.

"It was unfortunate," Alberts said. "I can assure you with our volleyball program, they get anything they want."

Cook downplayed the incident, and said there was no controversy or ill will with the football program. Two days later, Rhule posted a photo of him posing with the volleyball team at a table. Rhule bought them lunch.

Cook said that he and Rhule "talk and share stuff." Cook has taken him to a rodeo, and they've gone out to dinner. Both of them know what it's like to feel the weight of an entire state. Before the season even starts, Cook hears fans telling him that they've bought tickets to the national semifinals. His team lost in the Sweet 16 to Oregon this past December, and it was viewed as a down year by many. The Huskers were 26-6, and it was the first time in a decade that they didn't advance to the regional finals.

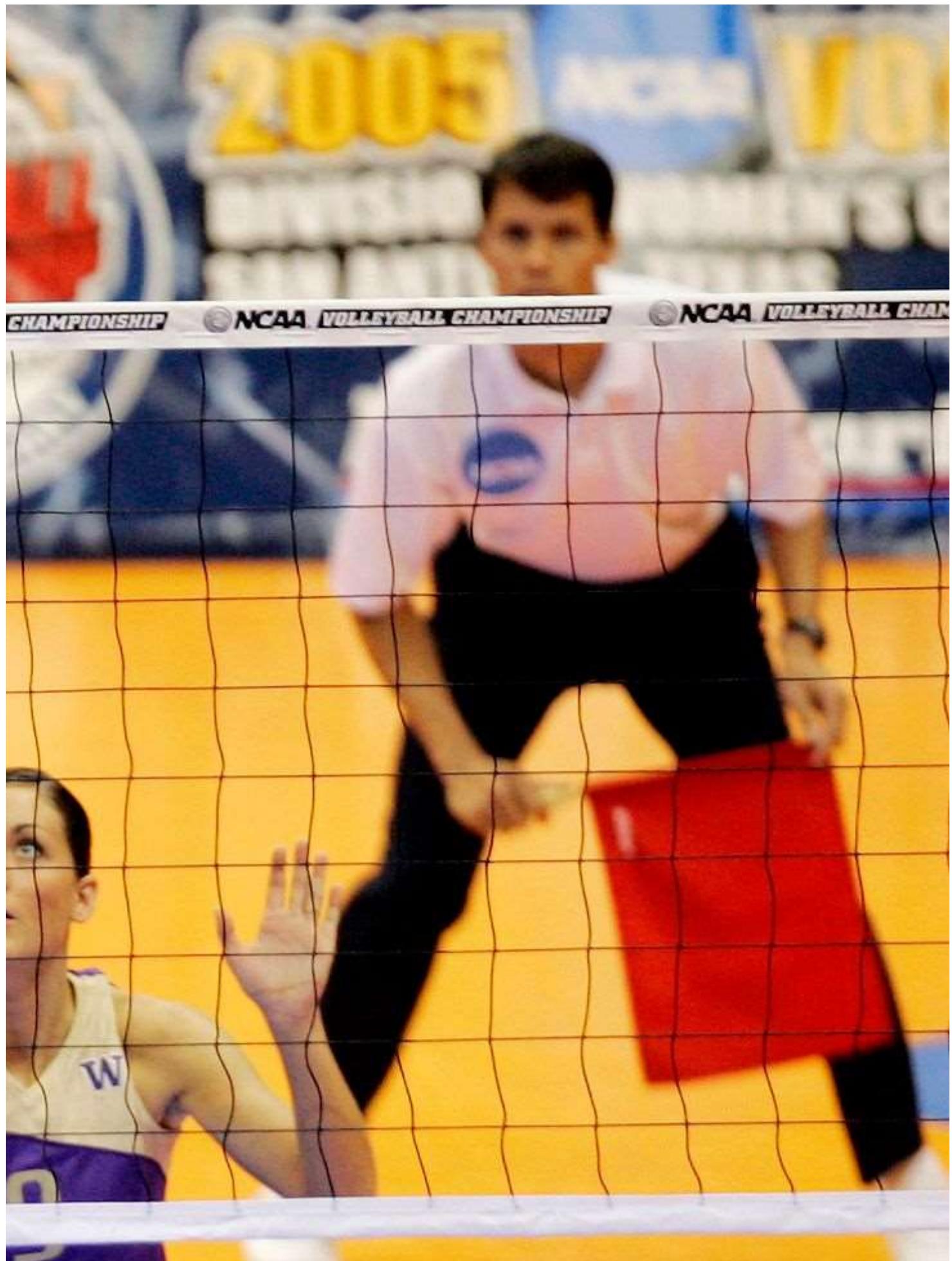
The Cornhuskers scheduled a spring exhibition match this year in Central City, Nebraska, population 3,032. Fans lined up the night before tickets went on sale, and sold out the 2,100-seat arena in 52 minutes.

Cook, whose team often wins, would rather have people intensely care about his program than face the opposite.

While the football team has not had a bowl game since 2016 and men's basketball has lost at least 20 games in three of the past four seasons, volleyball has become arguably the most beloved program in the state. Cook is the biggest success story in college basketball, and women's, is as revered, or regarded, as he is.

"You look at the two big sports," Cook said, "and they've struggled. So it's been a great opportunity for women's sports, and we just happened to be in a position where we've been pretty successful."

"We've been a ray of hope for Nebraska."



COOK FOUND OUT about Jan Merrill in early August. Her nephew, Heath Petsche, wanted to boost Merrill's spirits, so he shared his family's story with Peterson in the Nebraska volleyball office. He explained his aunt's illness, her love of Nebraska volleyball and how much it hurt her not to be in Lincoln for Volleyball Day in Nebraska.

He asked if Cook could send his aunt a letter. Nebraska volleyball gets flooded with invites to youth games and birthday parties, and sees its share of odd requests. One man, for example, said he carved wooden likenesses of the players, and asked for their parents' addresses.

But when Cook heard Merrill's story, he stopped what he was doing, sat down in his office and recorded a video.

Rob Merrill played the message for his 66-year-old wife as she lay in bed. He forgot to unmute the video at first, but when Jan heard Cook's voice and realized that he was talking to her, "Her eyes got huge," Rob said. "She busted out into this honest-to-God grin and you could tell she was so amazed by it."

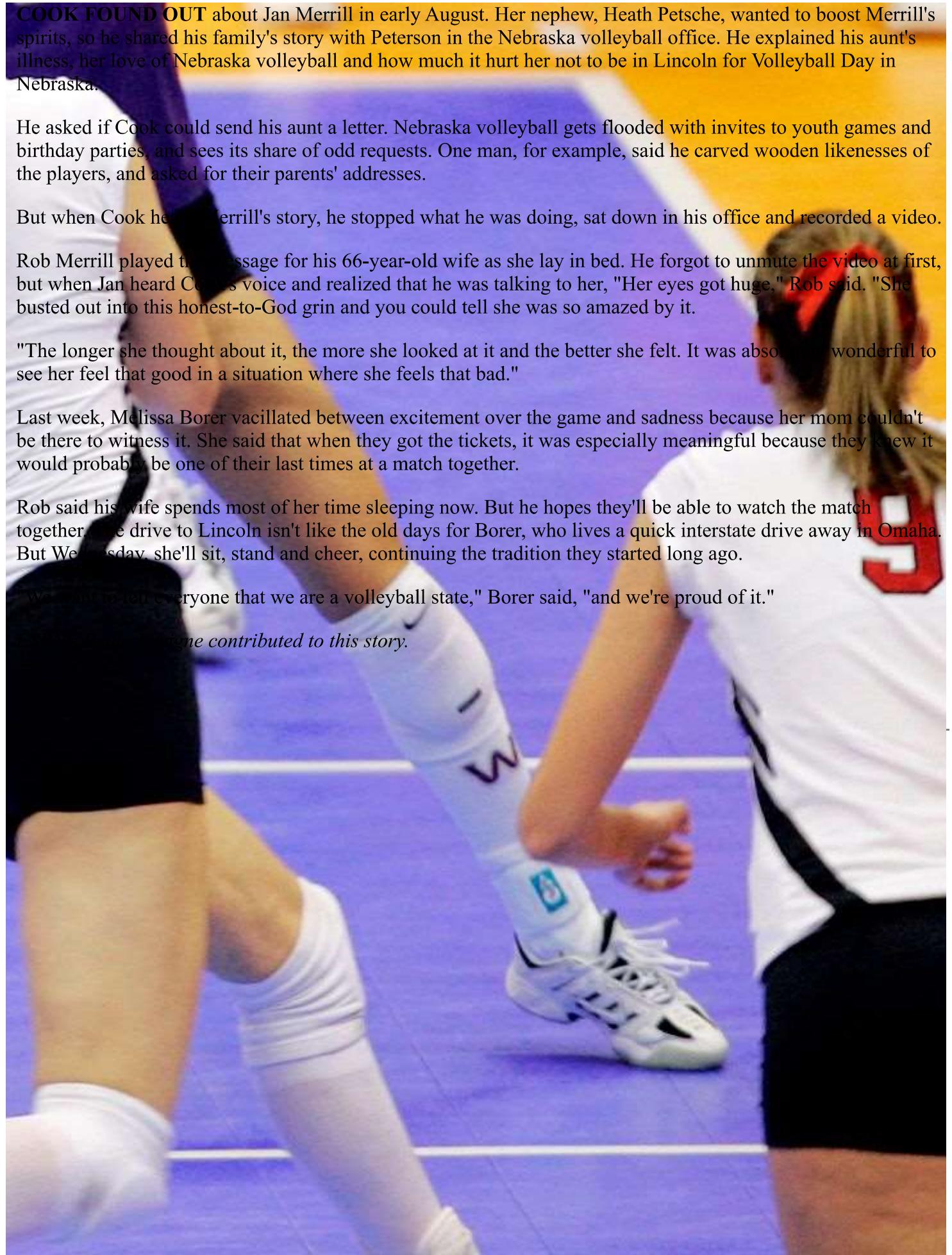
"The longer she thought about it, the more she looked at it and the better she felt. It was absolutely wonderful to see her feel that good in a situation where she feels that bad."

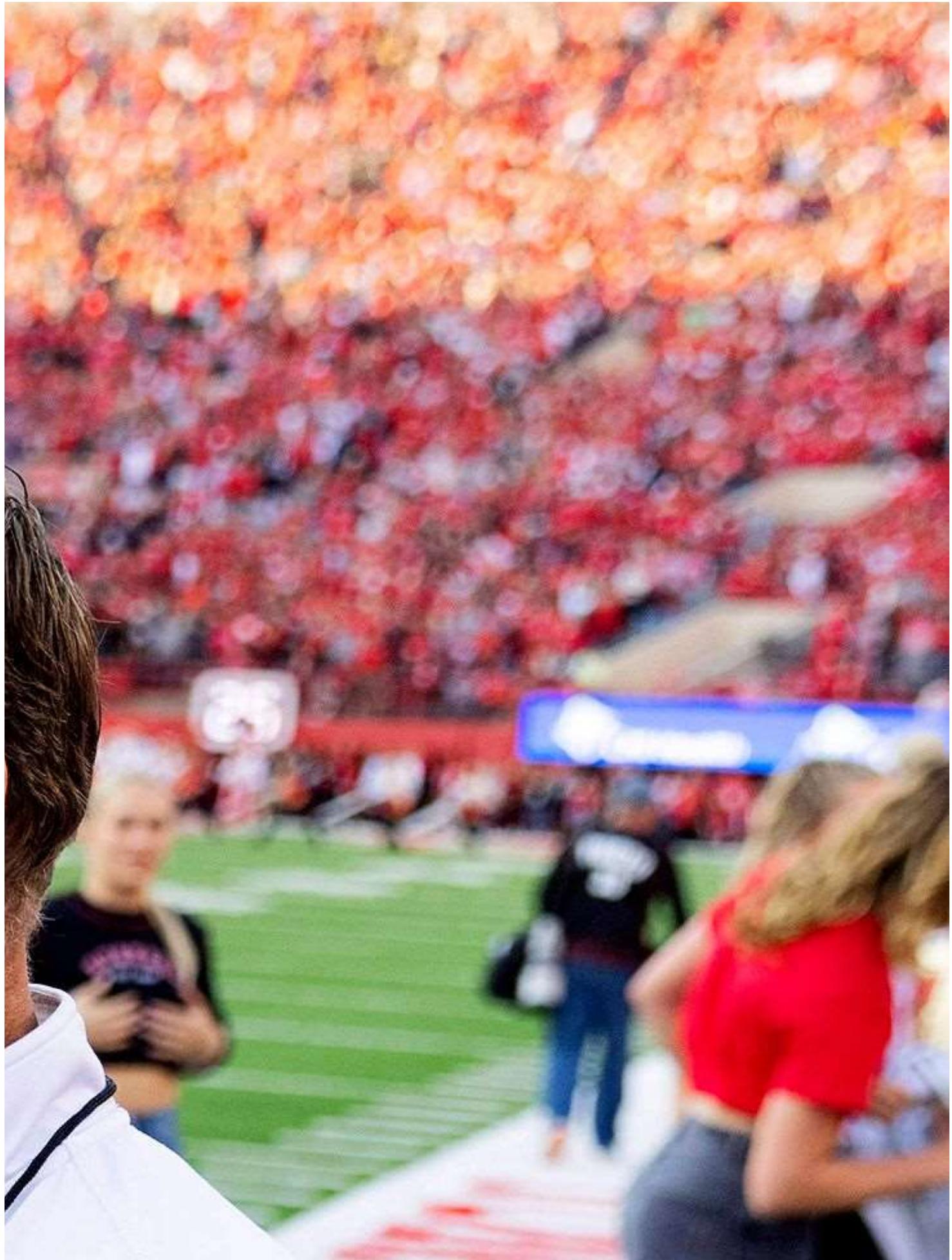
Last week, Melissa Borer vacillated between excitement over the game and sadness because her mom couldn't be there to witness it. She said that when they got the tickets, it was especially meaningful because they knew it would probably be one of their last times at a match together.

Rob said his wife spends most of her time sleeping now. But he hopes they'll be able to watch the match together. The drive to Lincoln isn't like the old days for Borer, who lives a quick interstate drive away in Omaha. But Wednesday, she'll sit, stand and cheer, continuing the tradition they started long ago.

"We want to let everyone that we are a volleyball state," Borer said, "and we're proud of it."

ESPN's Paula Lavigne contributed to this story.













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